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Minority ethnic young people: Confident negotiators

Rowena Arshad with Katherine Botterill, Peter Hopkins and Gurchathen Sanghera

... Most people actually do [think I am Muslim]. Like, and our RE teacher once thought I was a Muslim because of my skin colour. Then, yeah and when I first came to this school some of my friends now were shocked that I was a Catholic. They thought I was Muslim as well. (**Donald, Indian, male, 12–15, Greater Glasgow**)

Donald (his chosen pseudonym) was one of the 382 young people interviewed as part of a three-year project led by Newcastle University in partnership with the University of Edinburgh and the University of St Andrews. The study, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, explored the everyday experiences of black and minority ethnic young people in Scotland aged 12–25 (Hopkins *et al.*, 2015). It was conducted in 2014, so it covered the period of the Scottish Independence Referendum, which gave a vote for the first time to every 16 and 17-year-old. The 382 young people took part in individual interviews and/or focus groups. Participants were accessed via various routes: schools, further and higher education sites, youth and community groups, third sector agencies and places of worship. There was also an element of snowballing, where young people introduced the research team to others.

The participants spoke about issues affecting their everyday lives: their home and notions of belonging, being a minority, their identities, the neighbourhoods they lived in, their school experiences, their views on Scottish politics and life in the city, suburbs or countryside. This article draws out a few issues from that research and considers the role school education can play to address them, particularly post-Brexit

and at a time when the role of education is more critical than ever in developing students' political literacy.

In Donald's case, the research team had visited his school and conducted several focus group discussions with secondary-age pupils. One of the focus groups was specifically for young Muslim boys. Donald took part in the focus group as his teacher had assumed he was Muslim. It was not until the researcher looked at the self-classification form that each young person filled in that this misclassification came to light.

Tackling misrecognition

One of the key themes we explore in this article is misrecognition. Our research provided many examples of simply 'not recognizing' who the other person is.

In Donald's case, misrecognition had the impact of negating who he is, what his beliefs are and his background. The next quote is taken from a focus group of young Sikh women:

I remember when I first made like one of my friends like someone like two years ago, and she was like, 'what are you?' And I was like, 'well Sikh'. She was like, 'what like a Muslim?' And I was like, 'no like Sikh'. And she was like, 'is that not the same as Muslim?' And I was just like, 'Oh God, no!' And she was like, 'I don't get it, so you are Muslim.' 'No', people actually just think that if you are brown, you are Muslim. (**Sikh focus group, female, 16–18, Aberdeenshire**)

In both examples, misrecognition arises from a failure to recognize diversity but also from succumbing to assumptions and stereotypes. It is however not only on grounds of religion or ethnicity that people are put into boxes; misrecognition can also box individuals into ‘them’ and ‘us’, as Renukah’s experience demonstrates. *‘... the way I speak and the way I act, I think is Scottish, but it is my skin colour ... people think that I am not Scottish.’ (Renukah, female, 16-18, Glasgow).*

Hopkins *et al* (2017) warn that misrecognition ‘closes off opportunities and possibilities for cross-cultural engagement and interaction and so has significant consequences for people’s ability to live together comfortably’. If these examples were single instances, swift intervention would set the matter right. However, repeated experiences of misrecognition – which, our research suggests, really does characterize the lives of many young people from minority ethnic backgrounds – taken altogether can be seen as ‘micro-invalidations’ that are corrosive and wearing for the individuals who are misrecognized. It invalidates them, erodes their self-esteem and sense of self-worth and places them in a position where their personal identities are called into question. In education, where research tells us that issues of self-esteem, worth and wellbeing are important bases for effective learning, it is important that we think again about how we understand and engage with the concepts of recognition and misrecognition as part of daily teaching practices and interactions within the classroom or school environment. For example, how can we use the curriculum as a tool for tackling misrecognition?

Micro-aggressions

This brings us to the second theme education has been slower to grasp: the concept of ‘micro-aggressions’. When the study concluded, we shared the findings with teachers as part of continuing professional development sessions. These were teachers who had given up their

Saturdays to come and engage with the research findings. All of them were interested, engaged and willing to learn. Many were active antiracist practitioners. What we learnt was that staff development work around multicultural and antiracist education that had been offered in the past had gone some way to ensure that certain teachers were relatively confident about identifying and dealing with overt racism such as name-calling or racist terminology. In recent years, such staff development opportunities have diminished and even disappeared. What we found from these Saturday sessions was that there was less awareness of the ways low-level racism is occurring and how it can impact on the students’ everyday lives. Teachers reported to us that many colleagues still viewed the absence of overt incidents as a proxy for all being well.

Earlier we used the term ‘micro-invalidations’ but now we want to locate this term within the concept of ‘micro-aggressions’. Psychiatrist Chester Pierce first used the concept of ‘racial micro-aggressions’ in the 1970s. It was further developed by Derald Wing Sue, a psychologist and educator who followed research conducted at Teachers College, Columbia. Wing Sue suggests that there are different types of micro-aggressions:

- micro-assaults
- micro-insults
- micro-invalidations

Micro-assaults are explicit, easily recognizable and easiest to address. Examples include name-calling and deliberate acts of discrimination based on ‘race’ or other characteristics. Micro-insults are more covert and the impact of such insults are generally at a level not felt or understood by those who aren’t on the receiving end – for example, telling someone ‘you speak good English’ or asking someone whether they acquired a position because of positive action. Micro-invalidation is in operation wherever there is systematic exclusion, denial, negation or

questioning of the everyday realities of minority ethnic people. In our study, many of the young people talked of being misrecognized. We would suggest that the various forms of misrecognition are forms of micro-invalidations.

Our study found that micro-insults and invalidations were occurring but were often not recognized by those who aren't on the receiving end. The question then is how, as teachers, do we become better able to identify different forms of micro-aggressions, whether based on skin colour, religion or some other characteristic?

Opening spaces to discuss contemporary issues in schools

Young people – majority and minority – in the main viewed diversity as the norm but wanted more opportunities to talk about racism as well as new expressions of racism related to Islamophobia, anti-immigration attitudes and religious intolerance.

Researcher: Do you learn about things like racism and diversity issues and things like that?

Dala (female, 16–18, Greater Glasgow): A little bit but not, not as much, I think there should be more, yeah more on that. But I think, I think the school like to play happy families a little bit.

Researcher: In what way?

Dala: I don't know, I think they, they're kind of, we have our incidents but sometimes I think, not at this school but sometimes they like to brush them under the carpet a little bit these kind of racism incidents. But I think there should be more awareness of it, there definitely should be more awareness of it [referring here to Islamophobia].

Sasha (female, 16–18, British African, Christian, Glasgow) agrees with Dala:

I think it's good to talk about it 'cause people, lots of people still pretend it's not there and

like 'oh it doesn't exist, we're in 2014' but it does, it really does so I think it's good to talk about it and for people to like know about experiences other people have had so they can learn from experience and example.

Young people also wanted opportunities to locate discussions within their own context and in the present:

Obviously what you are being taught about Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela and all that, it is all stuff that has happened in the past, but I think it is important to reinforce like modern day stuff, because like obviously our country has modernized like and I think it would be beneficial to bring up more current events like stuff that happens on an everyday basis rather than big events that happened back then. Because I think the small things are the things that really change your view on things because you know it is happening in the moment. **(School focus group, mixed Muslim group of male and female pupils)**

Where teachers have opened up spaces for discussion or proactively engaged with contemporary issues, young people welcomed such opportunities. However, these opportunities were the exception rather than the norm. Having opportunities to engage in robust debate and discussion about issues, as opposed to just being presented with statistics and sanitized discussions, appeared to depend on how confident the particular teacher felt about handling such material. There were accounts from young people who indicated that their teachers were very supportive, open to issues and actively assisting them to critically consider issues that are arising, globally and locally. However, there were also accounts where young people made clear which teachers were simply not interested in them or in equality issues.

Research (Hick *et al.*, 2011; Show Racism the Red Card, 2016) tells us that teachers continue to report their lack of confidence about

discussing race-related issues and specifically different forms of racism. Given the diminishing opportunities for professional learning in this area, the challenge for teachers is how to develop the knowledge, practice and confidence required to assist both majority and minority young people to become confident citizens in tackling prejudice, bigotry and the various forms of discrimination.

A key question for school leaders has to be: how are they creating opportunities to talk about racism and also the new expressions of racism based on Islamophobia, anti-immigration attitudes and religious intolerance? More importantly, how are pupils engaged in shaping such learning?

The normalization of racism in everyday lives

An issue of concern to emerge from the study is the extent to which young minority ethnic people took the view that racism just happens, as Rani, a Muslim girl aged 16–18, who comes from Glasgow, indicates:

There will always be, I feel like everybody, you know, all minorities do experience racism now and then but you just kind of, you know, it's kind of have to deal with it I guess.

Tylo, a Scottish Algerian young man from Glasgow, avoids being judged as a Muslim by not mentioning his faith group. The fact that 'normal' would entail having to hide aspects of who he is presents another angle to the misrecognition and micro-invalidations discussions earlier: '... so I don't, I don't really mention it too much. I kinda just act as if I'm normal.'

The need to merge and not be seen as different was echoed by Ryszard, a Polish 16–18 year-old living the Highland of Scotland:

I'd think they would think I was different and would treat me differently so I just don't mention I'm Polish at all. Like my classmate

who I've been friends with five years now only found out I'm Polish a few months ago ... I'm not afraid to say I'm Polish if they ask but I won't bring it up on my own, so I won't bring it up and in conversation I won't randomly spout out and say I'm Polish.

These young minority ethnic people were acutely aware of everyday racism on grounds of accent, skin colour, faith, dress, nationality and ethnicity. There is a great deal of work with young people, seeking their views and enabling greater participation and input of the pupil voice. However, how much of this work seriously reflects on how young people might be able to exercise their rights to participate in a range of ways, given the context of their everyday realities? What can teachers and schools do to empower and enable young people like Tylo, Ryszard and Rani to be recognized for who they are? What more can schools do to assist those who are in the majority to understand that diversity is the norm?

The majority of young people in the study were developing coping strategies to fend off comments with humour, to not take offence and even to try to educate the person making the comments. However, there were some who simply withdrew from being exposed to unsafe situations, social interactions and spaces, thus denying themselves the liberties many of their peers enjoyed.

Many of the young people are highly skilled cultural negotiators, able to straddle cultures, languages, identities and religion. They were conscious of being different and often of their ascribed identities but equally determined to establish how they wanted to be defined.

Amber, who lives in a rural part of Scotland, ebbs and flows across her multiple identities, refusing to be boxed in or categorized by existing profiling frameworks:

I would use Scottish Muslim on my Instagram actually...yeah I would say I'm proud to be

Scottish and Muslim at the same time. So if I go to England I'm automatically the minority and doesn't matter if I'm Muslim or not, I'm still Scottish. So I think being Scottish and Muslim is quite unique and plus I'm Indian and Pakistani as well so I'm a Scottish Muslim and Indian and Pakistani.

Yet many talents, skills and depths like these are often missed or hidden to us as educators. How can we enable young people to continue to flourish as confident straddlers rather than having to hide or assimilate into what is perceived as the 'norm'?

Looking ahead

We have come a long way from the days of assimilationist practices where those who were othered were expected to give up their otherness and fit in. There is now a recognition of the importance of having a lens of 'plenty' that encourages us to value diversity in all its complexities and richness. However, what we have also learnt is that racism and discrimination morphs into new forms, and that it would not be possible to address or capture all of its dimensions.

Now more than ever, educators need to consider in each subject area, for each age and stage, how they can teach political literacy. Maitles suggests that this would include helping young people to: 'spot bias and exaggeration, analyse critically different pieces of evidence, weigh up sources and come to conclusions and develop skills for investigating issues' (Maitles, 1997).

While many of us might argue that we have been doing just what Maitles suggested and have been pursuing an active multicultural/intercultural and antiracist agenda, what our Scottish study shows is that we cannot take our foot off the accelerator. We have to find

ways to continue to connect with the everyday street-level experiences of young people and to develop our own confidence in teaching about and raising issues of racism and racial discrimination in all its forms.

Issues of multiculturalism and antiracist education have largely been framed around how to support pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, the aspirations and life trajectories of minority ethnic young people can be enabled or disabled by the views of the majority. Clearly, therefore, urgent work is needed to educate the majority.

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